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CHAPTER VIII

MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE

MARRIAGE

Polygamy.

THERE being no chiefs on Vao, or on any of the Small Islands, the practice of polygamy, common throughout Malekula, is not carried to any great lengths. The greatest number of wives possessed by any man at the time of my visit was four. Godefroy, writing nearly twenty years later, says that in 1933 there was only one man with as many as three, and that not more than half, or possibly a third, of the married men have more than one.[1] The rest have two, which is considered by most to be the ideal number. There is, however, no social compulsion to have more than one, and some men of wealth and influence of high Maki rank content themselves with a single wife.

The result of this, and of the high bride-price to which all near paternal relatives (that is to say all members of the suitor's Lodge) contribute, is the late age of marriage, which rarely takes place before the husband is 25. The competition to obtain wives shows itself in the early age at which girls are betrothed (see pp. 192, 193).

There are two main methods by which a man acquires a second wife:

(*a*) by inheritance of the wife of a deceased elder brother;[2]
(*b*) by choice.

In either case an additional wife is a definite asset, not only in providing children, but also in helping in his gardens. Since, when a man feeds at home, and on certain ritual occasions, his wife cooks for him, this aspect of marriage is somewhat cynically expressed by the phrase that a man with two wives is "master of two cooks."

THE RITUAL OF MARRIAGE

I give here two accounts of the marriage rites, a short one recorded by myself and a longer one by Godefroy.

[1] Godefroy, I, 1933, p. 184.

[2] See p. 138. Godefroy (1, 1933, p. 34) asserts that it is usually the deceased's elder brother who, as chief provider of the bride-price, usually inherits his deceased younger brother's wife. This was, at the time of my visit, forbidden, and if it is allowed now, must be the result of a break-up of the old kinship regulations.

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Author's Account

Betrothal. Young girl proposed for by the suitor's parents.

It is usual for a girl to be betrothed to a man, or literally "retained" (*e tutu ghore*)[1] by him, when she is in about her sixth or seventh year. A man chooses the girl he wants to marry, but negotiations are carried out exclusively between the respective parents, the girl herself not being consulted. The proposal is made by the suitor's father or mother, one of whom goes to the girl's father and says, "Wouldn't it be a good thing if my son were to marry your daughter?" If the father agrees, an appointment is made for two or three days later, when the suitor's parents (still not the suitor himself) return, bringing with them a single pig, of any size up to that of a crescent-tusker, and ten or twenty money-mats. By this payment the girl is officially "retained." The new set of kinship terms resulting from the proposed alliance are immediately adopted, and at every subsequent feast or ceremony held in their respective villages the suitor and the girl's parents must present to one another the customary pigs, as if the girl were already married. Needless to say, the balance of gain is strongly on the side of the prospective parents-in-law.

Bride-price.

When the girl has arrived at the proper age, negotiations are entered into concerning the bride-price. The pigs which the suitor proposes to pay are displayed to the girl's father, who usually objects that they are not many or good enough. The suitor then produces others. In the haggling that follows the prospective father-in-law has completely the whip-hand. If he is still dissatisfied with the proposed bride-price he will say, "Never mind, my daughter can wait," and the suitor and his family are sent scouring the country, to bargain or beg for yet further pigs from their friends. They cannot protest or threaten not to take the girl away, for they would then lose not only the pigs paid at betrothal, but also all those presented to her father at every subsequent rite.

Bride left with her husband. Payment.

At last the price is agreed upon, and the suitor's parents (still not the suitor himself) go to the girl's father and appoint a day when he shall come and leave his daughter with her new husband. This is called *e tulo ni*, "he conducts her." On the appointed day the girl's Lodge-brothers come to the suitor, bringing a basket of yams for each pig that is to be paid. Returning home, they oil and decorate the bride and she

[1] Compare the name of the betrothal rite recorded by Codrington from Oba and called *huhu vuhe goroe*, meaning "to give her suck with a drinking coconut and secure her" (Codrington, 3, p. 241).

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partakes of a farewell pudding cooked by her mother.[1] Then, with her face painted red and herself now carrying a basket of yams, she is escorted to the house of the bridegroom. The pigs are handed over one by one without ceremony, beginning with the smallest, and distributed among the bride's relatives. If the last and biggest has attained the size of re-entrant-tusker, a conch-shell trumpet is blown. The bride is now left with her husband. Formerly he would have already built a house for her, but with the incipient disintegration of native culture he is now, as a rule, too lazy, and the couple live together either in his own house or in that of his father while he slowly constructs a new one.

Godefroy's Account

Godefroy's account[2] is longer and more graphic, and, while omitting some of my facts, contains others omitted in my record.

Words used for "marry."

To express the act of marrying they use a word, the root of which is common in almost all dialects, namely *lage*, together with the corresponding substantives *lagean*.[3] This is the true word meaning "to marry" or "marriage." In Vao there is a second word, which does not appear to go to the bottom of the matter as does the first, but which indicates rather the symbolic gesture, namely *tuka*, "lead into the house" (a native takes a woman into his house only in the case of marriage). When one hears the words "*Mal-kali mo tuka vavine*," literally "Mal-kali has led a woman," everyone knows that this means "Mal-kali has just been married, he has taken a woman."

Betrothal.

This is how the natives perform the marriage contract. Let us take a typical case. Melte-sale is a young man 18 or 20 years old; his parents have decided that the time has come for him to marry. They themselves choose the spouse, a girl who has been nubile for a year or two. They make their decision known to the young man. If he makes no objection, this is a sign that the choice pleases, and that he agrees.[4]

[1] Speiser (3, p. 295) states that if the bride is still very young she is provided with false breasts made of painted coconut shells. False breasts made in this way are worn by young men taking the part of women in the *na-leng* mumming plays described on p. 338 of this volume, but I never heard of them being worn by young brides. Speiser states also that the bride's mother on this occasion places a yam on the girl's lap as a fertility symbol.

[2] Godefroy, 1, 1933, pp. 117-21. Paragraph headings and footnotes are mine.

[3] My spelling of these words is *lagh* and *laghean* (see p. 133). Cf. Mota *lag*, "to marry"; *lagia*, "marriage."

[4] Elsewhere, however, and contrary to my information, Godefroy says, "It is the mother's brother who makes it his business to find his sister's son a wife, whom he himself chooses."

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584 The ceremony of betrothal consists in a presentation by the young man's parents to the girl's relatives of several pigs and three or four pounds in English money,[1] saying, "*Kam tuto gore*," [2] "We have retained her." The news immediately spreads, and from this moment the betrothed girl becomes taboo; she is now under the vigilant watch of her future husband and of his parents. The betrothal is always accompanied by a feast.

Date fixed for the wedding. Pigs and yams collected.

583 Several months later, a date is fixed after the coming yam harvest, when the marriage ceremony is to take place. Meanwhile, the young man's clansmen, his father, father's brothers, his own brothers, his paternal cousins, toil to collect the twenty or so tusked boars and the thirty or forty pounds which will be necessary to pay for the girl.[3] On their side, the girl's relatives go to their gardens every day to dig up the desired number of yams—two or three hundred. These yams are brought to the young man's village and stored on great yam-tables constructed from bamboos in the form of a platform; this platform rests on stakes, about three feet from the ground, in order to preserve the yams from the ravages of the pigs which roam over the island. The young man's people also dig yams, but in smaller quantity.

Preparations for the wedding. Decoration of yam poles.

585 One or two weeks before the appointed day, the men, youths and boys set about energetically cutting bamboo poles, to which each individual's share of the yams will be attached. These bamboo poles, about twelve feet long, are garlanded with wild flowers, dark red, with strong, almost fadeless petals, called *lok-lok*.[4]

Each works at his allotted task, and the preparations for the ceremony advance. All of a sudden, it is announced that the great occasion is fixed for the day following the next full moon; there are only two days left. Orders are given to keep the pigs ready for delivery; others are given to complete the decorating of the bamboo poles. These famous bamboo poles are arranged thus. The young men, with a hibiscus flower or two jauntily stuck into their hair on one side of their heads, carry the poles to the front of the husband's house; one end is cut so as to form a fork. An arm's length below the fork are attached two or three yams, according to the rank of him, or of those, for whom they are intended; then, between the yams and the fork, they tie on the red *lok-lok* flower; to this

[1] Replacing the ceremonial mats (*mangau*) still in use during my investigations.
[2] Godefroy's *tuto gore* is equivalent to my *tutu ghore* (see p. 192).
[3] Compare the ten pigs said by Harrisson (2, p. 26) to compose the bride-price at Matanavat. But this is a vague statement, as neither the rank nor value of the pigs is given.
[4] Amaranthus.